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BORIS YELTSIN AND THE FIRST CHECHEN WAR

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BORIS YELTSIN AND THE FIRST CHECHEN WAR

In the fall of 1994 Russia moved inexorably toward armed intervention in Chechnya, a member of the newly formed Russian North Caucasus Federated States. In reviewing Russian national interests for its subsequent insertion of an armed force into Chechnya, it is evident that President Boris Yeltsin failed to take into account numerous environmental factors. Consideration of these factors and careful analysis of them should have resulted in the Russians pursuing alternative means in the pursuit of their vital interests. Boris Yeltsin's subordination of Russian national interests to consolidating his sagging political support at home set the stage for an unnecessary military intervention in Chechnya that, combined with a flawed military strategy, was doomed to failure from the onset.

DETERMINANTS

The year 1994 was a time of unprecedented change in the Russian political scene. Yeltsin was still shoring up a political base fractured by ultra nationalist tendencies that had dominated domestic politics. The Kremlin had just signed a treaty with Tatarstan in February after two years of negotiations. This agreement had given the Tatars broad economic and political freedoms and, most importantly, kept them within the Russian Federation. As background to this treaty, major changes in the Russian political scene had resulted in a political structure that enabled President Yeltsin to conduct national policy with minimal oversight or

constraint. President Yeltsin had dissolved the federal parliament and had his most bitter political opponents imprisoned.¹ Yeltsin then held elections, formed a new parliament, and passed a new constitution that gave him new sweeping presidential powers. The Kremlin, under President Yeltsin, defacto became the epicenter for all major policy-making in Russia.

The survival and validation of the Yeltsin administration freed the Russian administration to focus and act on emergent policy issues like Chechnya. A continuing problem during this period was Chechnya's leader, Dzhokar Dudayev. His declaration of independence from the Russian Federation served to block Russian strategy of maintaining hegemony in the North Caucasus region from as early as 1991. Kremlin efforts to have him sign a union treaty, similar to that of Tatarstan, were rebuffed. Dudayev had originally been prepared to sign a treaty but faltered when it became apparent to him that Russia would continue to try and remove him as President even if he cooperated. This situation presented an excellent opportunity for the Kremlin to flex its newly constituted power. In fact, "defending Russia's unity" would be the centerpiece of Yeltsin's public proclamations as to the primary reason for military intervention in December 1994.²

¹ Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, "A small Victorious War," Chapter 8 in **Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus** (New York: NYU Press, 1998) pp. 143.

² Anatol Lieven, "The Russian Decision to Intervene and the Geopolitics of Oil," "The Anarchy of Russian Decision-Making," and "Russian Strategy in Chechnya," from **Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998): pp. 93.

Russian unity, however, was not a priority amongst the Muslim mountain peoples of the North Caucasus. "It must be remembered that there is a legacy of hate and fear of Russia as well as the Russians amongst the Muslim mountain peoples of the North Caucasus. There are bitter memories of not only Russian imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries but also the 'present day after-effects' of Stalinist nationality policies..."³ Careful Russian analysis of Chechen history, social structure, geography, and culture prior to any military intervention would have concluded that military intervention into Chechnya would be replete with risk.

Another consideration arguing against direct military intervention is the centuries long history of Sufi Brotherhoods. These brotherhoods have deep roots in the Muslim culture and are closely linked to the family or clan system. The brotherhoods have remained in their traditional mountain domains but have participated in armed struggles when they believed that unbelievers, such as the Russians, threatened their homes, culture, or way of life. The brotherhoods became increasingly involved with protecting their interests, distinctly different from either Dudayev's or Yeltsin's, as events unfolded in Chechnya during 1994.

RUSSIAN NATIONAL INTERESTS AND GOALS

The Russians viewed keeping Chechnya within the Russian Federation as vital to their national interests. Russia

³ Charles Blandy, "The Battle for Grozny," Janes Intelligence Review (February 1995): pp. 55.

believed that failure to retain this region would pose the threat of a Turkic-Islamic bloc forming within the region. Keeping this area within the Federation would not only enable Russia to maintain the region as an "outer buffer" zone, but also to preserve Russian hegemony. After the fall of communism and the break up of the Soviet Union, the Russians felt it imperative that North Caucasus and Transcaucasus region remain firmly within their sphere of influence. Specifically, Russian vital interests in the region centered on maintaining national security, economic well-being, and the continuation of Russian power and prestige.

Importantly, Russia wanted to retain control over the raw materials in the region. In particular, it was essential to keep Azerbaijan oil exploration, exploitation and delivery within their sphere of influence. Further, they viewed access to the Azerbaijani warm water ports of the eastern seaboard of the Black Sea as strategically important due to the precarious relationship with the government of Ukraine. Other major regional interests centered on the retention of the grain lands in the Kuban and Stavropol. These lands were essential in ensuring a continued adequate food supply for Russia and the other Federated states.

The national interests described above drove short-term political goals of President Yeltsin which of keeping Chechnya in the Russian Federation at all costs. Yeltsin's

long-term goals with respect to Chechnya were to remove Dudayev from power, thwart a growing Turkish influence in the Transcaucasus region, and maintain a future Russian influence in all aspects of the region's oil and gas industry. So, Russian vital national interests primarily centered on their ability to influence the projected future westward expansion/development of oil and gas pipelines in the Transcaucasus. Millions of dollars were at stake as well as the energy independence of the Federation.

STRATEGIC MEANS

In looking at the various means that could be used to achieve the Russian end state goals regarding Chechnya, President Yeltsin was faced with dealing with the problem Dzhokar Dudayev posed. Dudayev was an individual of unknown quantity to the Kremlin and it was becoming increasingly difficult to determine if his public pronouncements were in fact reality, calculated propaganda statements or something in between. As a result of Dudayev's policies, his popularity among Chechens was at an all time low. The Kremlin viewed Dudayev as an illegally elected official.

DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS

Prior to the beginning of military intervention into Chechnya, diplomacy was seriously considered as a means for ending Russian problems. As a matter of fact, Yeltsin had publicly announced through the Presidential Press Secretary, Vyacheslav Kostikov, that he had agreed to have a Russia-

Chechen summit. The date for the meeting between the two leaders had been set, but shortly after this announcement, there was an assassination attempt on Dudayev's life. Dudayev, increasingly influenced by personal paranoia, proclaimed that this was the work of the Russians who were also bent on exploding nuclear weapons over Chechnya. In a subsequent interview on Russian television, he called Yeltsin a "drunkard."⁴ Yeltsin obviously took the attacks personally and any chance of a Russian/Chechen diplomatic summit died. An excellent opportunity to perhaps realize all of the Russian national interests through peaceful diplomatic means was lost.

ECONOMIC EFFORTS

The agreement that Russia had just signed with Tatarstan was based on an understanding that it was economically beneficial for both nation states to maintain a close relationship. Economic incentives were part of the overall agreement that had been negotiated. Minimal consideration was given by Russia in utilizing the economic tools of statecraft to resolve the Chechnya crisis. Many of the same constructs that had been used in negotiating the Tatarstan agreement were equally applicable to the Chechen issue but were never pursued by the Russian administration. This was due in large part to the Russian's inability to work with Dudayev in any fashion.

⁴ Carlotta Gall and Thomas De Wall, "A Small Victorious War," Chapter 8 in Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus (New York: NYU Press, 1998) pp. 146.

INFORMATIONAL EFFORTS

The Russian government at one point tried the propaganda tool of statecraft as a means to discredit Dudayev. A massive propaganda blitz was launched addressing the evils of the Chechen regime. The purpose of the campaign was to discredit Dudayev and promote further instability in his government. President Dudayev was having serious political problems within Chechnya and some Russian intelligence analysts believed it was only a matter of time before he was overthrown. The Russian propaganda campaign was ineptly conceived and conducted. In the end, the campaign only served to strengthen Dudayev's hold on government. At the same time the propaganda blitz was underway significant covert activities were initiated by the Russians to support one of Dudayev's political opponents in the hope that the Dudayev regime would be toppled. This covert support took the form of money, military personnel, and equipment. The publicly stated official policy of Russia was that this ferment was still an internal Chechen problem. After a series of incredible blunders, Dudayev's political opponent was defeated and the extent of the Russian support and involvement was exposed. The result was a unification of Chechnya behind the corrupt Dudayev and a very embarrassed Kremlin.

MILITARY INTERVENTION

Prior to the military intervention into Chechnya, significant debate centered on the internal and external

political implications that such an intervention might provoke. In a meeting between the Prime Minister and the other power ministers from Defense, Interior and Security, the Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev, was asked whether force should be used and what he felt the international community's reaction might be. Mr. Kozyrev's response was that the military response if "quick, decisive and limited" would be appropriate and that the international community would treat the whole affair as a "strictly domestic Russian affair."⁵ If the operation were as described, it would also serve to boost Presidents Yeltsin's standing among the Russian population. More importantly, it would further solidify and build his political power base.

In the late summer of 1994, Yeltsin, in an attempt to strengthen his political hold on the Kremlin made a series of changes in the Kremlin leadership that further enhanced his "Divide and Rule" style of leadership. The political make-up of his new appointees was consistent in that the majority of them were hawks and authoritarian and nationalistic in nature. At virtually the same time the new ministers were being put in place, the Russian ruble crashed and yet another group of upper echelon Russian leaders were fired and replaced. It was in this political environment that the decision to use the military tool of statecraft to enforce national policy was made. Moderates who advocated alternative strategies were kept at a distance from Yeltsin

⁵ Ibid. pp. 158.

and discredited. During this period President Yeltsin also committed himself to a hospital and further distanced himself from potential advisors. Early on, Yeltsin had been significantly influenced by a highly misleading Russian Counter Intelligence Service (FSK) intelligence report regarding the state of Dudayev's defenses. The report grossly underestimated Chechen military capabilities. From this poor start, Yeltsin's use of intelligence was basically non-existent and his self-isolationism led to a further series of poor strategic decisions. A Russian Security Council meeting was held to validate Yeltsin's decision to invade Chechnya. No dissenting opinions were allowed during the meeting. The Russian leadership did not address the most basic questions that should have been asked regarding the implementation of a military strategy to support a national policy. There was no understanding of any clear political goals that could be achieved by using the military instrument. It is also noteworthy to point out that the Defense Ministry was left out of the decision making process to invade Chechnya until a couple of weeks before the actual invasion.

Summarizing a security council meeting where Yeltsin announced his decision to use force, the Secretary of the Council, Oleg Lobov, stated in a phone call "It is not only a question of the integrity of Russia. We need a small

victorious war to raise the President's ratings."⁶ The apparent perception among the leadership was that Chechnya would simply be the Russian version of the U.S. incursion into Haiti. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the country had lost the decision-making apparatus that it had previously used to make national policy. The natural governmental checks and balances were simply not in place when the decision to invade Chechnya was made by President Yeltsin.

ANALYSIS OF THE MILITARY INSTRUMENT

Yeltsin's flawed political strategy in the Chechen crisis was surpassed by the Russian Army's complete failure to develop a coherent military strategy. A quick Russian military success in Chechnya at the time of the invasion would serve President Yeltsin well. In the final analysis, the combination of badly flawed intelligence combined with the pressures of President Yeltsin's domestic political agenda led to his decision to use military power as the tool to meet Russian national interests in Chechnya. Yet, the Russian military misunderstood the character of the conflict and, as such, set about a series of poorly planned and executed operations that were militarily doomed from the outset.

From the military's perspective in 1994, the Russian Armed Forces were very unwilling to engage in an armed intervention in another national movement. Memories from

⁶ Ibid., pp. 162.

Afghanistan were still fresh in the minds of the senior military leadership. At this point in time, only an issue as critical as territorial integrity or national sovereignty would serve as an impetus to gain the active support of the Russian military. But still, the military intervened.

MILITARY OBJECTIVES

Russian military strategy focused on two main objectives. Their first objective was forcibly removing Dudayev from the Chechen presidency. The second was capturing and controlling the capital city of Grozny. The Russian Army's objectives in Chechnya showed little understanding of the concept of the Chechen center of gravity and a complete lack of vision with respect to the campaign's end state. Both were inexorably connected to the fiercely independent history of the Chechen people.

As a whole, the Chechens held little affection for Dzhokar Dudayev who had led them to the brink of economic ruin since assuming power in 1991. There was significant internal opposition to his corrupt regime that, left to run its course, would have been sufficient to foment moderate political change in Chechnya. Even so, a failed Russian coup attempt on 26 November 1994 combined with Yeltsin's subsequent 29 November ill-advised ultimatum for Chechen disarmament solidly united the Chechens behind Dudayev. The result of failing to take this basic historical perspective into account was that Dudayev was misidentified as a

militarily significant center of gravity to Chechen resistance.

From the Chechen perspective, Dudayev was a convenient anti-Russian rallying point but not at all critical to the Chechen people or their cause. "Although Chechen politics were highly fractured, most Chechens rose up to oppose the Russians—not for vague political reasons, nor for Dudayev, but to defend their families and homeland from a historical oppressor."⁷ After misreading this fundamental social context, the Russians determined by extension that the most expedient way to eliminate Dudayev was to invade and occupy the capital city of Grozny. But instead of achieving their expected end state by quickly controlling Grozny, the Russians became mired in a protracted conflict that would distance continued military action even further from political goals.

The clouded future of Grozny in January 1995 stemmed from the Russian Army's miscalculation of the relative capabilities and vulnerabilities of the Russian Army and the Chechen resistance. The Russian military grossly overestimated their superiority in modern weaponry and the effects they would achieve in Grozny. "Only 6,000 Chechen fighters would contest the Russian advance on Grozny, facing an equal number of Russian combat troops attacking with tanks, artillery and armored personnel carriers."⁸ Russian

⁷ John F. Antal, "A Glimpse of Wars to Come," Army (June 1999): pp. 33.

⁸ Ibid. pp. 33.

forces expected that Chechen resistance would evaporate in the face of the concentrated might of the Russian Army. They were wrong. Chechen civilians blocked approaches to the city and harassed inexperienced and under trained Russian troops who had little stomach to engage "non-combatants." At the presidential palace, ad hoc resistance rallied and soundly defeated an overwhelmingly superior Russian force. "Group *Sever*, formed from the *Maikop* 131st Brigade, lost 20 of 26 tanks, 102 of 120 infantry fighting vehicles, and all six *Tungas* self-propelled antiaircraft vehicles. Only 11 men survived."⁹

Humiliated by their crushing defeat initially, the Russian military embarked on a combined arms assault on Grozny that eventually resulted in Russian control of a ravaged city. Yet the Russian flag flying over the Presidential palace in Grozny and subsequent actions in the surrounding plains and mountains did not subdue the Chechens. "Unable to oppose the Russian juggernaut in the cities with conventional forces, the Chechens girded themselves to fight a long guerrilla war."¹⁰ And guerrilla warfare was not in the lexicon of the Russian's strategic concept.

MILITARY STRATEGY

Russian strategic concepts, both political and military, centered upon quick military action to resolve the

⁹ Ibid. pp. 36.

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 38.

Chechen crisis—a low risk effort for the Russian Army. Stepashin, Chief of the FSK, favored a small show of military force and “reported to the President that it would need only two or three hours of military pressure, not even military force, to change the situation radically.”¹¹ Lt Gen Anatoly Kvashnin, commander of Russian forces in Chechnya, felt that there was little chance for an all-out war and “believed that Dudayev’s forces would fall to opposition forces in Chechnya in a matter of days or weeks.”¹²

Yet Russian strategy crept incrementally from that initial low risk intervention through an all out combined arms assault and ended at the doorstep of all-out guerilla warfare. Military objectives began to feed upon themselves much in the same way as they did in the U.S. experience in Vietnam. Like the North Vietnamese, “the Chechen insurgents—many of them former Soviet soldiers trained in mountain guerrilla fighting—dug into the hills, and waged a long, fierce, and widely distributed battle of attrition.”¹³ In the space of five months, the Russians found themselves embroiled in a conflict replete with risks for which they had not bargained. A common characteristic for the military action can be summed up by Emil Pain’s observation that “first there were actions, then decisions.”¹⁴

¹¹ Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, “A Small Victorious War,” Chapter 8 in **Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus** (New York: NYU Press, 1988), pp. 163.

¹² John F. Antal, “A Glimpse of Wars to Come,” **Army** (June 1999): pp. 31.

¹³ John Arquilla and Theodore Karasik, “Chechnya: A Glimpse of Future Conflict?” **Studies in Conflict and Terrorism** No. 22, 1999: pp. 211.

¹⁴ Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, “A Small Victorious War,” Chapter 8 in **Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus** (New York: NYU Press, 1988), pp. 148.

RISKS AND COSTS

It is abundantly apparent that the decisions that President Yeltsin made failed to account for the enormous risk military action posed to his political objectives. It is also clear that the Russian military did not grasp how risky their combat plans were to those goals at each step of escalation. Yet, once committed, their planning failed to account for anything close to the level of resistance they encountered. Had they considered the risk of an obvious historical possibility of significant resistance, they could have easily extrapolated the Chechen response of guerilla warfare. The signs were certainly at the surface of Chechen rhetoric from the outset. In January 1995, a 35 year old resistance fighter, Adi Ismailov, warned "One thing I can tell you, whatever the cost, whatever our fate, even if we are driven into the mountains, we will not forgive them a single drop of Chechen blood."¹⁵

The Russian Army should have understood the character of the conflict better—specifically, that the Chechen resistance would not meet the Russians on symmetrical terms. The Chechens understood that they were no match for the well equipped Russians in a conventional fight. They also understood that without a decisive battle to crush Chechen military resistance, Russian military strategy was doomed. In failing to accurately characterize the conflict, the Russian Army placed not only Chechen goals in jeopardy, but

also Russian interests throughout the North Caucasus. These were real and significant risks that should have been deemed unacceptable from the outset.

CONCLUSION

In retrospect, the events that occurred in Chechnya reflect a dysfunctional national strategy policy process in Russia. Yeltsin promoted personal political interests above the national interests of Russia. The most basic determinants that should have been considered in identifying the ends, ways and means were ignored, downplayed, or totally disregarded. As a consequence of this flawed process, vital Russian interests were not properly considered. Numerous perceived threats and opportunities were incorrectly identified or missed completely. The Kremlin was unable to appreciate the enormous potential risks and costs associated with their flawed strategy. The cumulative result of the breakdown in the development of their strategy led to Yeltsin's decision to rely solely on the use of the military.

Once the Kremlin had chosen the military as their primary instrument of statecraft, the military failed to correctly identify both the military and political centers of gravity within Chechnya. They also failed to recognize the physical and operational constraints that their forces would face in Chechnya. They fielded a force equipped and trained for symmetrical warfare and did not have alternative

¹⁵ John F. Antal, "A Glimpse of Wars to Come," **Army** (June 1999): pp. 33.

strategies identified that would allow them to adapt as the battlefield and circumstances changed. The intelligence the military had relative to Chechen capability was flawed most of the time. This, in turn, led to numerous false assumptions regarding the assessment of both Russian and Chechen battlefield capabilities.

The result of the debacle in Chechnya is that Russian and Chechen soldiers are still fighting and dying in Chechnya today. The vital national interests that the Russians identified have yet to be achieved. Unfortunately, the costs to both countries, both in manpower and rubles, continue to mount with no end in sight.